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MAPPING THE DISTANT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Director:

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Abstract

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By Ana Esteve Llorens, MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

Major Director: Corin Hewitt, Assistant Professor, Department of Sculpture + Extended Media

This Thesis presents several approaches through art making to deal with light and space and other things, and the relations that their interaction may generate.

An Empty Studio and a Beam of Light

It is the end of August 2009 and through the window of my studio in 1000 West Broad, a beam of light has been entering and exiting the room since I first moved here a week ago. The studio is completely empty, a yellow cord with two outlets hangs from the ceiling in the middle, two sheets of drywall and a curtain define the space of a small office, and the window facing south opens up the studio to the light of the day.

I observe the movement of the light. It adopts the form of a triangle due to the way it enters the window. After a while, I realize that the beam has moved towards the corner, decreasing its size and temporal presence. I decide to document it in photographs.

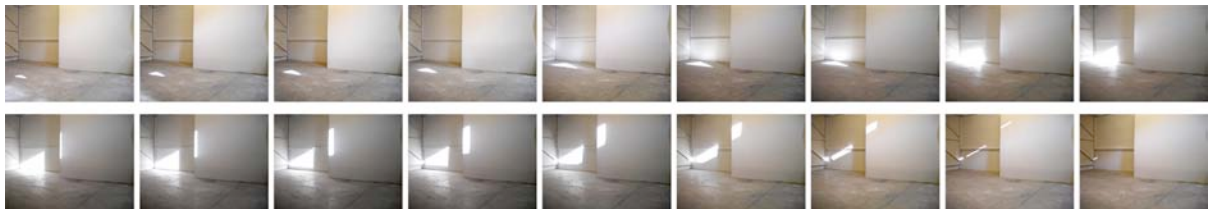


Fig. 1. *Ascending Triangle*, 2009 (18 C-prints)

A sequence of images translates the light's movement. The architecture of the studio frames the event of the triangle entering, moving along floors and walls, increasing in size, and disappearing again. I take images every five minutes during the 90 minutes of the event.



Fig. 2. *Ascending Triangle*, 2009 (detail)

Roland Barthes considers photography a vehicle to broadcast a prerecorded object. He states:

“...the thing of the past, by its immediate radiations, has really touched the surface which in its turn my gaze will touch.”¹

Susan Sontag relates the contingency of photography with the perishable quality of our surroundings. According to Sontag,

“... reality is summed up in an array of casual fragments—an endlessly alluring, poignantly reductive way of dealing with the world.”²

I find fascinating the idea of capturing a glimpse of reality. It is almost like finding a way of survival, or a way to rescue fortunate moments from vanishing or disappearing.

Photography grants me the possibility of giving light the chance to become matter, and to be permanently present. Through photography, the ephemeral projection of light becomes an object.

1 Barthes, R. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. (81)

2 Sontag, S. *On Photography*. New York: Picador, 2009. (80)

It wasn't until after I completed this piece that I learned about the light and space artists of the West coast, and came to understand one of the differences between the East and the West coast of the United States. In the West, the light is more vibrant.

I had experienced some of the work by James Turrell before being at VCU, but at the end of 2009 I read about “The Mendota Hotel Stoppages” for the first time.

The Mendota Hotel is a building where James Turrell lived in the late 1960s. Today it is still in the original location, at the corner of Main and Hill streets in Santa Monica, California.

For this body of work that Turrell did over a period of five years, he blocked the windows and left small square openings for light to enter. The pieces worked during the night, creating abstract compositions made of the light coming from passing cars, traffic lights, and streetlamps that would last from two to four hours.

“They came from outside the space. There was an intersection at Main and Hall, and there was nighttime activity that took place within that space...shop lights would come on, and I knew exactly what time they would do so. I also knew what time they would go off...So I had this universe—outside this space, and there were activities, which happened within it, and light energy. Then I had a space inside, within that room. A physical confine...”³

These works made me think of Znamya, a series of experiments that involved a space mirror, which aim was to reflect sunlight down onto selected cities in the Northern Hemisphere. In 1992, Znamya 2 was launched aboard the Russian spacecraft Progress M-15 from Baikonu. Baikonu is an operational space launch facility located in the desert of Kazakhstan and managed jointly by the Russian Federal Space Agency and the Russian Space Forces. The 20-meter-diameter, aluminum-coated mirror placed at the end of the Progress spacecraft, captured the light of the sun and bounced it back to the surface of the Earth. The beam

3 Butterfield, J. *The art of light + space*. New York: Abbeville modern art movements, 1993. (70-71)

traversed Europe, from southern France to western Russia at a speed of 8 km. per second. When it touched the Earth its width was 5 km. After several problems in Znamya 2.5, the second experiment, the mission was abandoned.

All three pieces described above, *The Mendota Stoppages*, *Znamya* and *Ascending Triangle*, deal with time and light, but also with the relationship between an exterior and interior space. There is always this incredible connection between the outside space and the intimate space of the studio, the outside being the street near by, another town or country, or the space where millions of unknown cosmic bodies float above us.

One of the reasons why I spend time in the studio may be to clarify this relationship, or to find an equation that, while making a piece, allows me to relate both, that exterior space and the nearer interior. The result may be something indefinite, but this is good, because in a way, it feeds the need for search, making me go back again and again.

See



Fig. 3. *See* (white poplar and dyed synthetic fabric)

In October 2005 I went to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas.

I spent one day in the renovated shed where Donald Judd installed 100 reflective aluminum prisms. All these pieces have the same form and volume, but they differ in their internal composition, and also in the way they reflect the light from the exterior.

In this installation at Chinati light is fundamental. The prisms become supports that register the passage of time through the changes on their surfaces. The desert and the exterior light are inextricably tied to these pieces. A relation between the inside and the outside is again established. It is a sort of transitivity, where each part becomes a container: the architecture containing the object, the object containing light and light as a container for time.

That simplicity of both the landscape and the pieces in contrast with the intensity of the experience of being there stuck in my mind. And in Richmond the luminosity of my studio called on me to capture these memories. Trying to find a form, yet an ephemeral way of containing light, I created *See*.

See is made out of 24 stacked squares. Each one of them frames a translucent and lightly dyed synthetic fabric. Resting on each other, and perfectly aligned, spacers are attached between each frame to create an empty space. This work does not represent anything but itself: in all of its interior space, light and perception. It is a volume with enclosures and openings that block out and divide the space.

The overlapping or layering of the 24 elements generates a visual unity that can be read as a

pure geometry, but also as a contained column of smoke. The geometry described by the stacked frames functions as a container, defining a space where light is given a haptic form and becomes visual. Therefore, the work creates a dichotomy between the inside and the outside. A plain modular exterior contrasts with a vaporous absorbent interior.

A couple of weeks ago, I found myself in front of some rectangular prisms by Judd in a gallery in New York: twelve identically scaled anodized aluminum works that differed through the combination of dividers and the presence of different colors.

These were new to me, and seeing them for the first time, to my surprise, became a touching experience. On the shelves of that gallery I found a monograph on Donald Judd, the newest publication by David Raskin. In his introduction he states:

“Donald Judd created spirit as well as form, thought together with feeling, and ethics alongside uncertainty. Polarities like these help keep existence open, and are, I imagine, one of the reasons why he objected to the label “Minimal”. “I don't think anyone's work is reductive”, he protested in 1966.”⁴

Filtering, purging and purifying contribute to the directness of the message, that is, to the irrefutable presence of the piece.

I believe that within each work a new reality is constructed. It is a composite of a portion of history and something still without a name, and this becomes a new work.

4 Raskin, D. *Donald Judd*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. (1)

Mapping the Distant

When you enter the space of the Carriage House, you bump into a flat white wall. Its height allows you to see the window in the background. This wall forms a corner with a higher wall, and the whole piece is slightly elevated from the floor by its internal structure.

To its right, approximately 20 feet away, another corner stands, a white corner 70 inches high. Its two rectangles describe an arch from the top to the floor.

Both pieces echo the architecture, and this view offers the first opportunity to establish connections with the several elements that comprise the house: the color of the walls, the vertical and horizontal lines describing different areas in the space, the corners, the windows and the arches of the wooden ceiling.



Fig. 4. *Mapping the Distant*, 2011. View of the installation.

When you walk into the space and you turn back towards the main entrance, the pieces reveal themselves. A blue photographic monochrome print hangs from the higher wall of the first piece, framed only by its sides and bottom, covered in plexiglass and facing the second piece. The second work describes an eighth of a sphere, its curved surface defined by a geodesic grid. Each section of the grid is filled with a squared piece that fits the size of the gap, and over each one a rough texture has been carved. Everything is white, with a hint of pearlescent color. Both pieces have elements that are in dialog with the architecture, as well as with the outside and among them. The section of the sphere is reflected and distorted over the surface of the plexiglass.



Fig. 5. *Mapping the Distant*, 2011. View of the installation

A Room For All Seasons



Fig. 6 *A Room for All Seasons*, 2011 (drywall, 2x4's, polystyrene foam, steel, brass, resin, lightbulb, c-print, wood, enamel paint, plexiglass)

An upside down section of a room rests on the floor. A hanging light globe rises from the ceiling, which for the viewer is the floor. Six pieces of molding cover the intersections between walls and ceiling. And from the inside of the space, the room offers a view of the outside space of the Carriage House.

The space left for the viewer is the space where this room may exist; in many places and at different times, and under several different meteorological conditions: when raining, when

sunny, windy, cold or hot, during the day, in the afternoon or early in the morning, also during the night.

The artist Anne Truitt writes of this quintessential room in her diary. On one of her walks, she watches a room through the slats of venetian blinds, and describes it as “a room for all seasons.”⁵

For me, this room was inhabited in many consecutive and intermittent moments: when drawing on the surface of a round table, when laying on the floor in a warm summer afternoon, when playing flute with the door closed, when opening the balcony to let the air in, the violent sound of the door closing with the draught, a small nose against the cold glass contemplating the snow, kids playing in the vacant lots outside, a pile of clothes resting on the rocking chair, a baby bathtub, a green puppet theater, his wallet, keys and cigarettes in the corner of the white shelf, and all the letters that arrived, stacked near the wall, some of them opened, and the ceramic cow full of pencils and pens.

5 Truitt, A. *Turn, The Journal of an Artist*. New York: Viking, 1986 (24)

Imaginary Geography



Fig. 7 *Imaginary Geography*, 2011 (plywood, polystyrene foam, enamel paint)

Last summer I spent some time in Spain. On one of my visits to Cala Granadella, I found a small rock near the shore. It looked like a volcanic rock, but when I held it, its weight revealed just an eroded piece of concrete. I decided to keep it and brought it with me back to

Richmond.

I brought it to my studio, set it on a shelf, and looked at it from time to time.

After a while, I decided to scan it in an attempt to more closely examine its texture. The results of the scan led me to split it and sort it, in irregular pieces, by size, keeping the curve associated with each piece. I continued by processing each section and joining the pieces with correspondent sizes, to regroup them later as a shell. This new surface was scaled-up and milled on a computer controlled three axis router, over the surface of the material that now covers one eighth of a sphere.

Looking at that rock was like looking at some kind of alternative universe. Now looking at the piece is like looking at a desert planet from faraway, or like looking at a close-up shot of an unexplored surface. From another point of view, it is like looking at a group of segments that define a horizon, and from the last one, it is a corner hiding some kind of unknown thing.

I have found some of these ideas have crystallized as I have been reading Anne Truitt's diaries. In *Turn* I found a passage from the 14th of July of 1982, where she describes one of her morning walks on the beach at Bethany Beach in Delaware.

“I begin each day with a solitary early morning walk on the beach, during which I am often the only person in sight. I step on tide-washed sand and run my eye along the blue-gray eastern horizon between sea and sky. If I slice this line into segments, each appears to be straight, but the sweep of the whole curves to render the world perceptibly round. Just so, an individual life can appear to be isolated and without purpose unless recognized as contributing continuity to lives that precede it and follow it, endowing each human span with rich universality.”⁶

The geometry of the sectioned sphere determines the continuity of the fragmented surface, granting a sense of wholeness to the piece.

6 Truitt, A. *Turn, The Journal of an Artist*. New York: Viking, 1986 (4)

On Translations or Words About Shapes

Reticent to talk about my work, I try to translate the vocabulary that I create in the studio.

I wonder about any kind of translation. Since a translation is never precise, and always subjective, the essence of what it is being translated will be lost during the process.

There is not a direct correspondence between the visual vocabulary and the verbal one.

There may be ways to address this issue, be it by talking descriptively or metaphorically as attempts to create a verbal conversation around the artwork.

I wonder if this is a search for meaning. Because if it is a search for meaning, and it's possible to reveal this meaning, once it's revealed, then the work of art dies. It dies because it's resolved in our minds, and the engaging with the work may disappear.

If it is not a search for meaning, it becomes a translation, and as a translation, it effects something different than the original experience of the work does.

Maurice Merleau Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, states:

“ Seeing, speaking, even thinking...have a name in all languages, but a name which in all of them also conveys significations in tufts, thickets of proper meanings and figurative meanings, so that, unlike those of science, not one of these names clarifies by attributing to what is named a circumscribed signification. Rather, they are the repeated index, the insistent reminder of a mystery as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source in obscurity. If we could rediscover within the exercise of seeing and speaking some of the living references that assign them such a destiny in language, perhaps they would teach us how to form our new instruments, and first of all to understand our research, our interrogation, themselves.”⁷

7

Baldwin, T. *Maurice Merleau-Ponty basic writings*. London: Routledge, 2004. (248-249)

I believe that there is another kind of thought that can be put into another kind of vocabulary: the one developed in the studio. Because I am sure that this is a thought and that the other is a language. Because I can assure that, I experience a broad variety of feelings close to the number of things that I experience when I read fiction, poetry, an essay or listen to music.

Therefore, for this thesis, I have chosen a descriptive way to talk about my work. A description is not a precise way to do it either, but that is the role of the pictures attached in each section. They are not illustrating the text. They are really presenting the work that is the aim of this thesis.

I have learned to enjoy the delightful complications of each process, in the studio, but also in front of the computer, when writing.

Making an object or taking a photograph is like writing a thesis, where adding and erasing play the main roles. It is a search for an exact and more accurate expression.

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Vita

Ana Esteve Llorens

Born 1975, Valencia, Spain

Education

2011 Master of Fine Arts, Sculpture + Extended Media, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, VA

2008 Master of Arts, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain

2007 Bachelor of Arts, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain

Grants and Awards

2009 – 2011 Fulbright Grant, US Department of State and Spanish Ministry of Education

2010 Best in show, New Waves 2010, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, VA

Vikki Katten Memorial Scholarship, Department of Sculpture, VCU, Richmond, VA

3rd Coll Alas Art Competition Award, Gandía, Spain

First place XII Sculpture Biennial Quart de Poblet, Spain

2009 X Contemporary Art Meetings International Award, Institute for Culture Juan Gil
Albert, Spain

2008 Senyera Sculpture Award, 51st Edition, Valencia, Spain

XII Art Proposals Award, Centro 14 Art Center, Youth Council of Alicante, Spain

International Blanca Landscape Grant, Visual Arts Space, Murcia, Spain

2007 Early Career Award, 7th Edition, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia Social Council, Spain

2006 Undergraduate Research Fellowship, University of Texas at Austin, TX

Ollie Trout Award, University of Texas at Austin and Ollie Trout Jewelers, Austin, TX

2005 Promoe Grant, European Union and Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain

Selected Group Exhibitions

2011 Our Cult's Classic, Pierogy Boiler, Brooklyn, NY

Mapping the Distant, MFA Thesis show, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA

Cartografías de la Creatividad. Cien por cien valencianos, Santo Domingo Museum of Modern Art, Dominican Republic^(*)

Fleeting Terrain, Gallery5, Richmond, VA

The Wrong Miracle, NoMinimo Gallery, Guayaquil, Ecuador

2010 Cartografías de la Creatividad. Cien por cien valencianos. Centre del Carme, Spain^(*)

New Waves 2010, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA

Six, Try-me Gallery, Richmond, VA

Almost Famous, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA

3rd Coll Alas Art Competition, Coll Alas Gallery, Gandía, Spain^(*)

XII Sculpture Biennial Quart de Poblet, Quart de Poblet Art Space, Valencia, Spain^(*)

2009 X Contemporary Art Meetings, Universidad de Alicante Museum, Spain^(*)

Crossed roads, II Edition, Installation at Casa Gregori Maïans, Oliva, Spain

X Proposals, Art Proposals Award, 12th Edition, Centro14 Art Center , Alicante, Spain^(*)

Corpórea, Universidad de Alicante Museum, Spain^(*)

Subtitles & Parts, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2008 Toque, Arthur Bispo do Rosário Museum for Contemporary Art, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Senyera Awards of Painting and Sculpture, 51st Edition, Tossal Gallery, Valencia^(*)

Bipolar, Bernardo Marques Gallery, Lisbon, Portugal

Ikas_Art, Art Fair, Bilbao, Spain^(*)

VI Competition *Obra para el Fondo*, Rosalía Sender Gallery, Valencia, Spain^(*)

Solo Exhibitions

2009 The Journey of Spaces, Centre Cívic Antic Sanatori Gallery , Sagunt, Spain^(*)

Looking Into the Void, Centro 14 Exhibition Gallery, Alicante, Spain^(*)

Knitting Space, Making Room, La Cripta de Santa María Space, Oliva, Spain^(*)

^(*) catalog edited